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ABSTRACT

The concept of inertia--the property by which a body in motion tends to remain in motion, and a body at rest tends to remain at rest--is analogous to a situation that occurs in reading. Some students, despite being able to read, choose not to read when other options are available. In terms of inertia, these students are at rest and tend to remain at rest, lacking the motivation to read. Several strategies and activities have the power to create an initial impetus toward independent and motivated reading. Reading aloud to children fosters growth in a number of reading areas, from developing a sense of story to improving vocabulary, as well as motivating students to finish a story started in a read-aloud session. Experiences in the school, such as field trips, guest speakers, and films, often motivate students to read books on related topics. Books themselves can be an experience that leads students into other books. Series books or books by a noted author can encourage a student to read. Daily sustained reading at school and at home can motivate students to incorporate reading into their own schedule. Cooperative activities, placing students in reading situations in which they have some responsibility for the success or failure of a group endeavor, also motivates students to read. If teachers can set students' reading in motion using these strategies, the motion can often be enough to sustain itself into independent reading and learning. (MM)

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Inertia:

An Important Consideration

for Reading Motivation

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Inertia: The property by which a body in motion tends to remain in motion... and a body at rest tends to remain at rest.

If I recall my freshman college physics class correctly, the above definition of inertia is reasonably accurate. Although the concept is meant to apply to matters of physics and the "hard" sciences, I feel that it is analogous to a situation that occurs in reading.

If, through the instruction they receive in reading, students don't lose sight of functional purposes for which reading is used, they usually become "self-starters" or are driven by an internal desire or need to read. That is, such readers choose, on their own, to read because they find reading an enjoyable and functional activity. In terms of inertia these readers are in motion and they act to keep themselves in motion. Starting a new book is no problem for them as it is simply a continuation of a very natural and integral part of their lives.

For other students, however, those who may be characterized as lacking proper motivation to read, reading may not be perceived as a functional or enjoyable activity. Despite being perfectly capable of reading, these students choose not to read when other options are available. Inertially, these students are at rest when it comes to reading, and they tend to remain at rest. This inertia is particularly evident and most powerful when such students begin a new book. It is not uncommon to find that such students are unable to make it through the first chapter or even the first few pages of the text. They lack the impetus to move themselves from their existing passive state in reading to the active state in which their reading becomes self-

sustaining.

Rather than a problem of reading skill or proficiency, this matter of inertia is a problem of motivation. Students haven't been given the proper nurturance in reading that leads them to becoming readers who read because they want to read.

Although the notion of reading motivation has been addressed in the professional literature (e.g. Criscuolo, 1977), the methods and approaches that are advocated are often quite general and tend to be directed at keeping motion in reading sustained rather than being aimed at getting movement in reading started when it currently is at rest. It seems that serious consideration needs to be given to getting at-rest readers over the first few pages or the first chapter of a book so that the initial build up of interest can sustain movement throughout the book and that the movement through one book can be sustained through many books. For many readers it may be that that initial help through a new book is all it takes to make a self-starting, self-motivated reader.

The remainder of this paper, then is devoted to a description of some specific strategies and/or activities that can be used to get students over than first hump in reading, whether that hump is a first book or just the first chapter of a first book. Many of these strategies can be used as general motivating devices for reading. However, I have chosen them for their power to create an initial impetus toward independent and motivated reading.

Read Aloud. From developing a sense of story to improving students' vocabulary, teacher read alouds has been endorsed as an activity that fosters growth in a number of reading areas. This endorsement also applies to reading inertia. If students have difficulty in getting

through the first chapter or chapters of a book, then it is entirely appropriate for the teacher to read those chapters to the students until they are hooked and can finish on their own.

Jim Trelease (1985) tells the delightful story of the 6th grade teacher of remedial students. These students definitely suffered the negative side of inertia. They were readers at rest. Despite initial protests by the class, the teacher read aloud Where the Red Fern Grows to the class. Slowly interest increased to the point where one student, on his own, checked the book out of the library over a weekend and finished it.

Certainly, teachers who choose their books wisely can create situations in their classrooms in which a read aloud can be the impetus for self-motivated reading.

Experience followed by Reading. Schools are places where children should learn through experience. Used effectively, such experience can provide the drive necessary to get even the most reluctant readers started and sustained in books. Many children have shown me how a vacation trip in the summer or an out-of-school activity has lead them into books on a related topic. After a vacation trip to Boston, for example, one student consumed books about the Revolutionary War and Colonial America.

The same idea is equally applicable to schools. Experiences in the school should be related to books on similar topics. The experiences can take a variety of forms. Field trips, special speakers and guests in the school, movies and videotapes, role plays, skits, experiments, artifact collections (jackdaws), demonstrations and the like can swell interest to the point where further reading on

the subject is a natural and desired extension of the activity. Watching a motion picture of video portrayal of a book, or a portion of the portrayal, can stimulate reading of the book in two ways. First, the visual portrayal creates an interest in the topic of the book itself. Second, the movie or video creates and/or activates the required background information in the readers to insure that they will comprehend the book when read. Often it is the case that a book is put down because the reader encounters substantial difficulty in making sense out of the book. An incomprehensible book is certainly neither enjoyable nor worth reading.

Again, teachers need to be familiar with a variety of books on a variety to topics to help students choose the very best books for extending the experience. Librarians and media specialists should be a major help in this regard.

Books as an Impetus. Books themselves can be an experience that leads students into other books. A book read by the teacher can lead to other books by the same author or on the same topic. Series books, such as those on Curious George, Strega Nona, Frog and Toad, or books by one noted author, whose books cut across similar themes or elements such as William Steig, Betsy Byars, or Beverly Cleary, are the kinds of books that can lead a student seeking more on his or her own.

One teacher recently told me of her own son whom she characterized as a reader who wouldn't read. She brought home Don't Make Me Smile by Barbara Parks and read the first few pages to her son. Not only was this all it took to get the youngster rolling on that book, but within days he had read several other books by Parks.

Making connections between students' specific interests and books

that match those interests can also spark the internal motivation that will carry a reader through a book. This is particularly true of informational books. There is presently such a wide variety of informational books that it is difficult to think of a topic or interest for which there is not at least one book. What this means for the teacher, however, is that s/he not only needs to know about books, s/he also needs to be sensitive to the range of interest that are in her/his classroom.

Daily Time for Sustained Reading. Students may not be able to sustain themselves through the reading of a book because they are inefficient in their allocation of time for reading. Good readers know that the best way to make it through a book is to devote daily large chunks of time to reading. With all the distractions of daily life vying for a child's time and attention, it is rather easy to see that finding time to read, especially when the value of reading has yet to be realized, is a difficult chore for many readers.

When students are unable or unwilling to set aside time to read, then it is up to the teacher and parents to build in such time into the daily school and home routines. Ten to thirty minutes per day should be sufficient time for students to discover that time for reading is a special and welcomed time of each day. With any luck, students will begin to make such times available in their own personal schedules.

One important rule to consider for this type of activity is that during sustained reading, students are not permitted to leisurely leaf through a pile of books or magazines. Sustained reading should be used for reading one or, at most, two books. Selection and advice on

selection should precede the reading time.

Book Format. It is not uncommon for students to avoid or fail to get started on books because they appear difficult. This perception is often due to the format in which the book is presented. Small print, minimal margins, lengthy chapters, and lack of illustrations and graphic aids can often result in a belief that a particular book in that format is more challenging than it actually is.

Obviously, book publishers need to be sensitive to this issue. Teachers also should be aware of the potential limitations of presenting books in formats that are perceived as difficult. Teachers can attempt to present books that are formatted in a more amicable manner to students and provide support to students who choose those books that they think will give them trouble even before reading the first paragraph.

Cooperative Activities. Placing students in reading situations in which they have some responsibility for the success or failure of a group endeavor appeals to students' sense of group membership to make it through a reading. When a group of students is asked to read, report, and be tested over a book, each member of the group has a responsibility to the others to complete the reading. Thus, the desire for group membership and identification can often spur an otherwise lethargic reader into activity that is sustained throughout the book.

Moreover, in cooperative groups the positive encouragement that students receive from and give to each other applies another powerful motivator to reading. Clearly, the pressure of peers is demonstrated in many sides of student activity and involvement.

When forming cooperative groups teachers need to be sensitive to the issue of heterogeneous grouping. Groups should be formed in such a way that each group is representative of the whole class in terms of ability and gender. In this way various perspectives will be available to each group and less able students will gain from the modeling of the more able.

Toward Independent Reading

Our goal as teachers is to get students to the point to where they are able and willing to learn on their own. This is difficult when so many students have little desire or motivation to read books and other substantive pieces of connected text.

One of the major causes of this motivational problem in reading is exhibited in many students' inability to make it through even one book. Good experiences with books lend themselves to further experiences. Bodies in motion tend to remain in motion. Yet, getting students through that first set of book experiences may be a major difficulty for teachers. Students may have had previously negative experiences in reading instruction and/or many view the reading of an entire book on their own as a challenge they are as yet unable to come to grips with. As a result, they often give up on reading something as substantial as a book after only a minor attempt. Bodies at rest tend to remain at rest. Nevertheless, teachers need to make strong efforts to get students to have positive initial book experiences so that a snowball effect can occur.

In this paper it is recognized that reading inertia is a potential problem for many students and needs to be addressed. Several approaches for getting students through that first book or set

of books are described here. If teachers can just set students' reading in motion, that motion can often be enough to sustain itself into independent reading and learning.

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